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## Girls in the Grass

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## *Girls in the Grass*

We're sitting in the bleachers at the Little League ball park. No one's playing ball, but some kids with a stick pretend. We have a game for after dusk, Truth or Dare.

Truth, Meg says.

So we ask her, did you ever let a boy feel you, there? Lyla and I each put a hand on one of Meg's thighs and inch our way towards the place we mean. The question is on our minds a lot since we start ninth grade in three months.

Yes, Meg says. She giggles, bats our hands away.

Who? says Lyla. How many times?

Meg reminds her of the rules: one question at a time.

Lyla and I wait, hungry as pups, for Meg's turn to come around again, but the next time, Meg takes a dare instead. We think and think. It has to be good. We tell her to climb up the bleachers from underneath, hang from her knees off one of the struts, and shoot us the moon. She doesn't argue. None of us ever do. That's why we play.

Meg empties her pockets into my hands, three rusty nuts, two dimes, and a slug. As she scrambles up the underside, we hear her monkey cries. She's skinny and quick. Nothing scares her. She puts her legs over the strut, swings down backwards and loosens her belt. In the shadows, her thick hair falls, as coarse and tangled and dark as deer moss in the woods.

For half a minute she struggles with her jeans, wriggling out of them to show us what we want to see. Finally she dangles there, with her pants pushed up almost to her knees. The ball park lights glint through the slats of the bleachers and the smooth globes of her bottom are striped, white and black.

Behind the old pine tree in Meg's yard, Lyla and Meg and I practice. I always have to be the boy because I'm the tall, lanky one.

Girls should make their kisses dry, Lyla tells us. Boys don't like slobber. Part your lips, she says to Meg. There, like that, and don't let them feel your tongue.

Boys can do whatever they want, that's what I think. I've only kissed two boys. One's tongue twisted all over inside my mouth, like it had a mind of its own and wanted to wrestle. The other boy opened his mouth so wide he got my nose and lips inside of it and I couldn't wait to catch my breath and wipe my face. I don't kiss like that when I'm being the boy, but I always try to slip my tongue between Lyla's and Meg's tense lips. It's nice when it's a little wet. And it's nice when they forget themselves and let my tongue dart in just far enough to feel where the skin of their mouths becomes as soft as the flesh of a grape.

Sometimes I get carried away and they say, not so far, close your lips, don't use your tongue like that, it tickles. They babble on and on and I let them because I know that when they've had their say, they'll both take turns kissing me again.

Meg can't stand still when she kisses. Her bony knees jab into mine, her sharp shoulders poke my breasts. She has no breasts at all, but I see her nipples perk up when we're practicing. They're so hard that even through our shirts I swear I feel them brush against my chest.

Lyla takes kissing seriously. She says she's professional. When I put my arms around her, she goes limp, like some daffy redhead in the movies, and I have to help her stand.

Boys like that, she explains. I shrug. Maybe they do. She sighs. Before our lips even touch, Lyla lets out a sweet, low moan.

Summer's almost over when Meg tells us her family is moving to California before school starts. To Lyla and me, California might as well be New York. It's all the same. They're both farther than we'll ever go. We try to imagine sand as white as a Montana snow. We picture Meg holding hands with a boy whose hair is golden and whose skin is bronze. We've seen photographs of California boys and they all look like that. The only brown-skinned boys we ever see have stringy black hair. They drive up from the reservation on Friday nights to crack nuts and drink beer at the saloon.

I'll visit, says Meg. I'll come next summer. You'll see.

But Lyla and I know that no one who leaves this place halfway between nowhere and the Canadian border ever has a good enough reason to come back.

My parents play bridge Thursday nights. Thursday is Meg's last day, so Lyla and I plan a party. I plead with Mom. We won't make a mess. We'll go to bed early. We won't cause Noreen any trouble. Noreen is my sister. She's three years older. She smokes cigarettes and wears pantyhose. Whenever she leaves the house, she stops in the alley and takes out her compact mirror to put on lipstick and mascara where our daddy won't see.

Lyla says we should invite the twins, otherwise it won't seem like a real party. Besides, we've all known the twins since we were about two. The twins don't look enough alike to even be sisters. One's pretty, with hair the color of wheat in the late afternoon. Her skin is rosy and her lips are bright. The other one is a pale towhead with eyebrows so light they disappear, but you never see the two of them apart and everyone has called them the twins, instead of Tamara and Theresa, for as long as I can remember. They don't talk much to other people, yet they're constantly whispering to one another. I watch them sometimes and wonder what they say. Their necks arch like two ponies. Their heads almost touch.

Noreen and I got in a scrap at least once a day when we were kids. One time I bit her hand so hard it bled. We don't have many squabbles now, but we're not exactly pals, since she'll be a senior next year and all. She understands a few things though, and on Thursday when I ask her to drive the five of us to the potholes, she doesn't fight me. Maybe she has plans of her own.

The potholes are three ponds right in a row out west of town. This time of year they're all shrunk up and swampy. Noreen acts like she doesn't notice we each have a bag, five bottles of sweet wine that Lyla talked her mother's boyfriend into buying. We're not the first ones here. Some boys we recognize are camped out by the small pothole, so we head for the bigger pond, the one in the middle.

My girlfriends have all been drunk before, at least they say they have, but I don't know what to do or how much it takes. We sit in a circle on a rickety dock. In May, the waves would lick at the edge of the wood and the dock would be damp, but tonight the water's nowhere near us. We each have our bottle ready to pass. They're all different. We have everything from apricot to strawberry. Lyla's mother would strangle her boyfriend if she knew he got wine for us, but he likes Lyle and he's not that old, so he doesn't care about the risk.

If you want to get really high, Lyla tells me, take a good swig each time a bottle comes around. I'm five inches taller than any of my friends, five-foot-eight and still climbing. We figure it will take more to get me drunk.

I do what she says. The others stop, but I don't quit drinking until all the bottles are



lined up in front of me, empty. The twins link arms and start singing a song no one else knows. We ask them. Together they say, it's a drinking song our father sings.

The wine doesn't do a thing to me except slosh in my bloated belly. We can hear the boys from where we sit, loud, ruptured syllables that don't make words. They're older and play football. Lyla's had her eye on one of them since we were in seventh grade and last year she made me and Meg go to all the high school games with her. Now she goads me into wandering their way, just to say hello. The whole earth tilts when I stand up. I hear myself laugh. It hurts my chest and sounds like it comes from a well inside my ribs.

I shuffle fifty feet before the wine hits me so hard it sends me reeling, just like I smacked head-on into a brick wall I can't see. Everything goes black for a second and returns in a blur. Lyla's pink shirt floats away, like a balloon bobbing ahead of me. She didn't smash up against any wall, only me.

Lyla, I say, I can't go any further.

Come on, she says, keep moving. You're all right.

I have to think, one leg at a time.

The boys are stretched out on their sleeping bags, drinking beers and waiting for the stars to light up.

Well, well, says Lyla's football hero, what have we here?

Wayne Caldwell isn't looking my way, but his friend is, and he sees what's going to happen just in time to get to his knees and break my fall.

Even as I tumble, Lyla forgets me. The boy who catches me holds my shoulders from behind while I puke in the tall grass. I know his name is Tim, but there's no reason for him to know who I am. He hands me something to wipe my mouth, a sock, I think.

I try to stand up, hoping I can get to Meg and the party again, but I can't even crawl by myself and Tim helps me scramble to his sleeping bag. He cradles me in his arms. Lyla sighs. She must be limp as a rag by now. Wayne's kisses are noisy and wet. I know his tongue is in her mouth and she doesn't mind. He grunts, like a pig that's stuck its nose in a corner and doesn't know enough to just back out.

I fall half asleep. Lyla's moans and the boy breathing over her hover at the borders of my dreams. Touch it, he says. His voice is wheezy and airless as an old man's.

I wake with a cramp in my gut, and cuss. Tim jumps to his feet and drags me far enough into the grass to miss his sleeping bag. He wraps one arm around my belly while I heave. With his other hand, he knots my hair to keep it out of my mouth.

The boy with Lyla howls, wild as a rabid dog when the first bullet hits its flank. Lyla doesn't make a sound, no sigh, no moan, no soft whush of a kiss that's almost dry. Her body is rigid. I don't know why I am so sure. She's ten feet away and I can't see her, but in my mind she lies still as a rock at the bottom of a lake.

Meg and the twins stumble around the edge of the pond, staggering towards us in the dark. The twins are arguing. I realize that when I can't see them, their voices sound exactly the same to me. Now I wonder. Maybe they are one person divided up in two bodies and it's all a joke, the way they look so different.

Meg's hand is on my head. She strokes me, rubs my temples. Then she grabs a clump of my hair and gives it a tough yank. It's my last night, she says, some party.

Tamara or Theresa sees the headlights first. She shouts. Meg tells me I better get on my feet before my sister finds me this way.

Noreen sees everything. Even though she knows the boys, she doesn't say hello to either one. She's too good for that, a whole year older, and just because Wayne Caldwell played first string quarterback when he was only a sophomore, doesn't mean my sister Noreen has to talk to him if she's not in the mood.

We pile in the car. All my friends climb in the back and leave me alone up front

with Noreen. Lyla and Meg and the twins are crammed in so tight they can't move. I make out their four faces, round and white as little moons, but I only spot five arms and three bodies, and I think of cattle jammed in a boxcar, the way they all strain their heads towards the open slats, the air. They'll stomp right on top of one another to get a breath and when the doors slide open to pull cows from the car, there are always more noses than tails.

Noreen looks at me under the murky light of the dome before she slams the door, revs the engine, spins her tires and leaves a billowing wave of dust behind us. I feel the mats in my hair. My knees are muddy from kneeling in the damp weeds and down the front of my shirt there's a crusty trail of spittle. The girls in the back seat barely squeak as we bounce over the dirt road and head for town. All the way home I rock with my arms wrapped around my own stomach and say I'm sorry about a hundred times. My sister wants me to shut up. She doesn't say a word. That's how I can tell. When we get to the house, she takes me straight downstairs. I have to lean on her. I mutter something about my friends and she tells me to forget it. Even though she's older, she's no taller than Lyla or Meg, but she's stronger than any girl I know and when she clutches me around the waist and I drape one arm over her shoulders, I know there's no chance she'll let me fall.

In the bathroom, Noreen peels off all my clothes, sits me down in the shower, and turns the water up full blast. Keep your head down, she says. You put your nose in the air and you'll drown, just like a fool chicken in the rain.

She comes for me after awhile and bundles me in a towel. I'm safe in bed before Mom and Dad get home from bridge.

I snatch four pills from the cabinet in the bathroom before Lyla and the twins and I walk home with Meg. My head's full of rocks and sticks. They rattle each time my bare feet slap the pavement.

We say good-bye and Meg hops in the car with her two little brothers, her mother, her father. She smiles. She waves. They drive away, just like that. It's all so quick, I don't have time to think.

The four of us sit on the steps of Meg's house with nothing to do. I dig in my pockets for the pills. My mom takes them for her back, or her migraines, or her neck. I can't remember. They take the pain away, she says, but I took one once and it made me feel like I could climb cliffs all day and never get tired. I figure we can use them now. My friends don't look so good after last night and I suspect it's a lucky thing I don't have to look at myself.

What are those? says Lyla.

Something for hangovers, I say.

We go around to the side of the house and turn on the spigot. Meg's dad forgot his hose. It's flung in the grass, coiled around itself, and the first spurt of water makes it jump and spit. We each pop a fat, green tablet in our mouths when the water runs clear. I turn the water off, almost. No one notices the trickle that dribbles from the mouth of the hose. Let it run all day, I think, all night, maybe tomorrow too. The whole yard will be a swamp. The basement will flood. No one will live in Meg's house for months and months.

Pretty soon, we feel it. We get so calm outside, we glide through the thick air. Inside, we jitter. Our hearts flutter like flapping wings. We want to get going. We don't know where, and everything takes so long, our hands are so slow. We make fun of them, like they don't belong to us.

It's hot. We don't sweat. Our throats are rough, but we don't need a drink. Our



stomachs growl like baby bears, but no one cares about food. That's what the pills do. We feel, but for once, just for once, we don't want anything.

The twins run home to get their bikes. Lyla's bike has a flat, so I tell her she can ride with me. We ride and ride, all the way to the potholes. I pump the pedals standing up the whole time since Lyla has my seat. All the energy I thought I had is sucked right out of me. As soon as we stop, I collapse in the grass. When I open my eyes, it seems like a long time has passed, a day and a night and most of another day. The twins have gone home for dinner and only Lyla's next to me, chomping on a blade of grass, staring at the blank, blue face of the sky.

Truth or Dare, I say.

Truth, says Lyla.

I get the idea she wants to tell me about Wayne Caldwell, that she's been waiting to tell me, but I don't ask her, did he touch you, there? Instead I say, did you love Meg?

Lyla props herself up on her elbows, going at that grass in her mouth like she wants to kill it.

I'll take dare, she says.

Usually I wouldn't let her squirm her way out of a question, but just this once I say, okay. Then I tell her to kiss me. I tell her I want her to be the boy.

She lies back down, picks more grass, shoves it between her teeth. Finally she says, we start high school in two weeks and I've been thinking, we're getting too old for these games. Know what I mean?

Yeah, I say, I know what you mean.

A bird soars, without beating his wings, so high above us that it can only be an eagle. He starts a dive, then swoops upwards again and sails towards the cliffs where he nests. I wonder if his sight betrayed him, if for a second he thought we were something silent and delicious, two wounded rabbits abandoned by the hunter, or if it's only my imagination and he knew all along we were just girls in the grass.

*Melanie Rae Thon*